

Mel's House

Swanson Coaches Final Home Game At Sherman

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P-J photo by Scott Kindberg

SHERMAN - His 1,550th career game in the books, Mel Swanson sat at a table in the Sherman Central School cafeteria on Tuesday night and began to flip through a scrapbook filled with photographs and articles that chronicled his more than 40 years coaching Wildcats' basketball.

As he did so, I pulled out a camera and began to snap away.

"Oh, that would make a nice photo," a bystander said.

Indeed.

On a night when the Sherman community filled the bleachers to honor the long and accomplished career of the retiring Swanson, there were plenty of Kodak moments to remember it by.

Walking into the lobby of the gymnasium is like being transported back in time on a Sherman basketball odyssey. On one wall is a glass-enclosed case filled with trophies, plaques and basketballs, commemorating a storied hoops history. On another wall is a video board that chronicles the Wildcats' all-time scoring leaders and other statistical highlights that would be the envy of any school anywhere.

Yet the most interesting item in the lobby on this night was a piece of white poster board that was taped to the wall adjacent to the door leading to the gym. The words read simply: "Lady Wildcat Alumni Sign-in Ceremony and Dedication." Divided into decades — 1970s through 2010s — former players who called Swanson, "Coach," affixed their names in the appropriate column.

All told, 35 women, ranging in age from their early 20s to their middle 50s and hailing from as far away as South Carolina, West Virginia and New Hampshire, showed up to celebrate the career of a man who first began drawing up plays during the Carter Administration.

Cindy White Hyland, a 1984 Sherman graduate, walked into the gym wearing her old school letter jacket. Seated on the Lady Wildcats bench during the junior varsity game, Swanson's reaction to seeing his former all-state player was priceless.



Sherman coach Mel Swanson hugs his wife, Mary, prior to Tuesday night's CCAA Division 2 West game against Cassadaga Valley in Sherman. P-J photo by Scott Kindberg

"What we did in the community for girls basketball was phenomenal and he had such a big impact on my life growing up," said Hyland, who operates a ski shop in Thornton, New Hampshire.

Reunions between Swanson and former players would become a common theme over the course of the next two and a half hours.

"I still hear that man's voice in my head when I'm running a race or whatever," said Pam Waite Benchley (Class of 1984), who teaches at SUNY Fredonia and has spent her life since leaving high school in health and fitness. "I just want to quit and you're like (hearing his voice saying), 'We don't quit out here.' He always yelled at me a lot, but you don't get it until you're older and then you realize you have potential.

"He makes great players, he makes great athletes, he makes great women."

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Sherman coach Mel Swanson flips through a scrapbook following the Wildcats' game Tuesday evening in Sherman. P-J photo by Scott Kindberg

For the record, the Lady Wildcats defeated Cassadaga Valley in both the jayvee and varsity games. In fact, Sherman's win in the varsity contest pushed Swanson's girls coaching record to 607-230.

But the list of gaudy numbers and championships — read by school superintendent Mike Ginestre — weren't the only reasons the community turned out on Valentine's Day. Rather, they also filled the gym to celebrate the love they have for Swanson, a retired teacher and athletic director.

The outpouring of affection clearly touched him.

"I don't know if there's a better basketball community around than this one," he said in a private conversation after the game and ceremonies. "We continually have support, and basketball has been successful, and that has something to do with it. Still, year in, year out people come in that have no contact with the team anymore and they're here to see the school play. ... It's a real testament to the community of people we have. ... They just keep coming back."

During his public remarks, Swanson paid special tribute to his family, particularly his wife, Mary, who at one point came out of the bleachers to join him on the court. The couple shared an embrace. In the final seconds of the varsity game, the student rooting section began to chant, "SWAN-SON, SWAN-SON, SWAN-SON" as the crowd rose to its feet for yet another standing O.

While the postgame celebration continued in the school cafeteria, I said my goodbyes and headed for the door, which took me eventually back to the gym. As I walked across the floor, I stopped, reached into my bag and pulled out my camera.

There was one last photo I had to take. I pressed the shutter, checked to make sure that the image that featured three words, including two in cursive writing on the baseline, was in focus and then headed out of the building.

The words read: "Mel Swanson Court."

"It's a great honor to have that," Swanson said, "but there could be so many names alongside that got me to the point where I am now."

Players, assistant coaches, administrators, fans and family were all part of Swanson's hoops journey, but just because he won't be calling out plays for the Lady Wildcats anymore, it doesn't mean he won't be returning to his home away from home.

"It's going to be a little hard coming to watch my grandsons play for Westfield on my court," he said.

That won't happen, at least for a year or two, but here's guessing the rabid Sherman basketball fan base won't mind having their old coach on his court whenever the spirit moves him.